

OPEN MUSIC ARCHIVE

EILEEN SIMPSON AND BEN WHITE:
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14 JUN – 18 AUG · 2019

Castlefield Gallery is pleased to present the first UK survey show of work by **Eileen Simpson and Ben White**, exhibiting a selection of their projects from the last ten years that explore the performative potential of the archive.

With a focus on the voice, this exhibition includes sound recordings taken from the genesis of the music industry in 1920s Atlanta, a lost feature film from 1950s Jordan, and samples ripped from 1960s UK chart hit records. The artists have collaborated with a range of people, using these rich archival materials, to produce an open source body of audio-visual artwork.

Working at the intersection of art, music and information networks, Simpson and White generate public resources. They are the founders of Open Music Archive (www.openmusicarchive.org) which sources, digitises and distributes out-of-copyright recordings. It is a site of exchange, and a vehicle for future collaboration. Their practice incorporates alternative peer-to-peer models, challenging default mechanisms for the authorship, ownership and distribution of art.

Struggle in Jerash (2009) is a project convened around a lost 1957 Jordanian feature film of the same name which is used as a catalyst to explore how value and meaning can be found in archival material. In 2008, whilst on residency at Makan House in Amman, Jordan, the artists gained access to the last surviving copy of *Struggle in Jerash*, a VHS transfer of the original 35mm film. Part 1950s gangster flick and part tourist documentary, the film is set in historical Jordan and Jerusalem and was produced by a self-organised group of aspiring filmmakers. Simpson and White have re-animated *Struggle in Jerash* by appropriating the tactic of commercial DVD director's commentary, replacing the authorial voice of the director with an audience made up of Amman-based artists, curators, filmmakers and critics. Several groups were invited to both translate and provide live commentary on the film, audio recordings were then edited to assemble a new soundtrack of parallel commentaries, anchored to the real-time of this remarkable footage. As they guide us through the film, exclamations and reactions echo from one voice to another while laughter erupts and resonates across the composite group. Simpson and White's work reveals the potential of this 1957 film to instigate conversations about shifting borders, liberty, politics, everyday life, national identity, religion and cinema for a contemporary audience. It was also important for the artists to not just offer their new work to the public domain, but to also redistribute the original out-of-copyright film. Although notorious as Jordan's first feature film, it was not until this project that *Struggle in Jerash* (1957) was made available for general circulation.

PLAYHEAD: A Parallel Anthology is an ongoing project initiated for the 17th Biennale of Sydney in 2010. The work brings together alternative versions of tracks found on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, a six-album compilation released in 1952 of eighty-four American folk, blues and country music recordings. Smith an artist, experimental film maker and anthropologist compiled the anthology from his personal collection of 78rpm records, originally issued from 1927 to 1932. The anthology contributed to the American folk music revival of the 1950's and 60's. *PLAYHEAD: A Parallel Anthology*, continues the lines of enquiry provoked by Smith's original erratic collection by re-circulating collectively-authored material and opening out the archive as a resource for the future. This 'copyleft' practice turns copyright on its head by offering people the opportunity to freely distribute copies and adapted versions of material, with the intention that the same rights be preserved in subsequent works.

Anthology of American Folk Music was accompanied by a booklet with Smith's notes and details about the recordings, in a similar manner *PLAYHEAD: A Parallel Anthology* includes a takeaway index that catalogues over 200 ripped public domain tracks and newly commissioned remixes, all available for download: www.openmusicarchive.org/playhead

Following the same track order of the original anthology, this evolving document indicates the tracks which continue to be restricted by copyright with a black strike through the title, the year in which copyright will expire is given in red. Highlighted in blue are different versions of the folk songs, recordings of which circulate freely unrestricted by copyright. New copyleft versions of songs, produced for this project are highlighted in orange. This index which expands onto the gallery walls, traces the rights that subsist within the recorded material, examining the public/private status of the archive, its ownerships and freedoms that prevent or open access. In the gallery, a continuous audio-visual stream acts as an archival 'playhead', which skips backwards and forwards between the tracks. *PLAYHEAD: A Parallel Anthology* envisages the anthology as a series of nodes in a larger network, tracing songs across spatial and temporal

distances. The folk tradition of passing on songs to be performed and shared by others is viral by its nature, here that tradition overlaps with contemporary practices of sampling, remix and peer-to-peer exchange.

In the late 1920s, Atlanta (USA) saw a flurry of recording activity, with music labels travelling south from New York to record the music of the surrounding area, from blues to Cajun and folk via country. Recordings were made in temporary studios in hotel rooms and function rooms across the city of Atlanta. This moment in history witnessed a considerable amount of collectively-authored music and lyrics being fixed to apparent authors and the commodity form of the gramophone record. Many of these recordings will continue to be controlled under copyright in the USA until 2067. For **ATL 2067** (2013/2019) Simpson and White worked with local hip-hop producers to reanimate 78rpm recordings from 1920s Atlanta, reassembling them into the rhythmic matrix of rap beats, plugging folk cultures from the early 20th Century into the beat cultures of the 21st, — rap, trap, and ghetto-tech — communicating between past, present and future.

A street level sound system was installed at the corner of Walker's Street and Peter's Street in Castleberry Hill, and Atlanta based MCs: staHHR, J-Live, Ekundayo and Boog Brown were invited to host and to extend an open mic invitation to the public, to rap about the future of the city. For five hours, people stepped forward from the crowd to improvise a freestyle rap cypher. The temporary sound system and assembled public occupied an optimistic, imagined future of 2067, the year that the collectively authored material will finally return to public ownership.

The Brilliant and the Dark (2010) takes as a starting point a cantata for women's voices, of the same name, composed by Malcolm Williamson and Ursula Vaughan Williams, first performed by 1,000 women volunteers at the Royal Albert Hall in 1969. Simpson and White negotiated with the copyright owners Josef Weinberger Ltd, to secure permission for elements of the original to be used as the basis for a new work. A 22-piece women's choir 'Gaggle' was invited to participate in the creation of the piece, exploring lyrics, melodic phrases and rhythms from the original. Involving remix and re-enactment, pre-recorded and live performance, the work presents a new copyleft composition for women's voices. **The Brilliant and the Dark** (2010) mimics the format of a promotional music video, featuring live lip-synch to pre-recorded playback. It re-stages elements of the original with props and costumes referencing both documentation of the choreographed performance and backstage preparations. The work interrogates the portability of open source methods to wider creative contexts, imagining the archive as source material, re-enacting and remixing this resource with a collective female voice.

Commissioned for British Art Show 8, **Auditory Learning** (2016) was shot on location in an anechoic chamber — a room designed to completely absorb the reflections or echoes of sound — at the University of Southampton. The artists worked with a group of local teenagers from Newtown, Southampton skilled in MC-ing and spoken word performance. The anechoic chamber was used as part recording booth, part performance space, and part computer science laboratory, with each member of the group invited to take up the microphone and use their voice to test out and play with beats, melodies and percussive sounds. The recordings of their voices were then processed using information retrieval software

adapted by Simpson and White, and matched to samples from out-of-copyright chart hit records from 1962. The film also features archival footage of a local group performing a cover version of 'Da Doo Ron Ron', (originally recorded by The Crystals, 1963), and recalls the history of sample culture, where musicians and producers would routinely rip sounds from the commercial hits of previous generations. In **Auditory Learning** (2016) the individual and collective voices of the group generate a 'script' for archival recall. Recorded sounds are stretched and warped to match live sounds, and voices activate the playback of public domain archival fragments to form a multi-layered, polyphonic chorus.

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A selection of material relating to the works in the show are available for sale in the gallery: *Struggle in Jerash* DVD, *The Brilliant and the Dark* 12" vinyl record, *Parallel Anthology* CD and *Auditory Learning* 7" vinyl record (available as cut on demand).

All material can also be downloaded for free:
www.openmusicarchive.org/projects

The exhibition coincides with the launch of *Everything I Have Is Yours*, an ambitious film and sound work by Eileen Simpson and Ben White (Open Music Archive) that looks back to the first decade of the UK pop charts (1952–62) commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella, the Contemporary Art Society, University of Salford Art Collection and Castlefield Gallery and presented at Salford Museum and Art Gallery from 4 July — 3 November 2019.

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